

Oh, No!

Her Lips Fell Off!

The Statue of Liberty High School Project

January – A Snowy Day and a Sculpture

It was a snowy day in January. Some children had boots to go out in the snow. Others did not. The teacher thinks aloud, "What a dilemma." The children know Mrs. Bellomo will not provide the solution but will listen and consider each of their ideas. They know she will help them try out their ideas. They know a solution that excludes part of the group will not be acceptable.

The solution comes. "Let's bring the snow inside for everyone!" Mrs. Bellomo and the boot group take the water table outside, fill it with snow, and wheel it back through the building into the classroom.

Pat, poke, taste, squeeze. Children pile snow on a tray. "Let's build a snowman!" Morganna worries, "Hey, it's getting too high to be a snowman." Wobble, tilt, slide. Mrs. Bellomo offers support and stimulation as the children feel snowman failure coming on. "A snow sculpture can be anything. Sometimes you don't know what you are sculpting until it just shows up and then there it is — your special work." She hands out craft sticks and demonstrates their use as a sculptor's tool.

Pile, pat, sculpt. Grant shouts, "There it is! I see it! It's the Statue of Liberty High School!" Grant calls everyone to see the statue. Mrs. Bellomo gets the classroom encyclopedia to use as a reference, so that everyone can see what the Statue of Liberty looks like. The children agree. It's her all right, but she needs some work. They study the encyclopedia. What is she holding? What is she wearing? What is that thing on her head? Can we paint lips on snow? Experiments result in a "yes!" if the snow is hard enough and the paint is thick enough.

This children's center is a lab school for early childhood education students at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. We are about two hours from New York City. Grant's mother works at Liberty High School so his connection between the statue and his mother's school building made sense to us.

Hmm, if this is the Statue of Liberty, then she has to hold a book. Real books prove too heavy, but eventually a solution arises in the form of a piece of paper folded like a book. The Statue of Liberty High School is declared finished. Now what to do with her? Will the snow melt? Will Grant be able to show the statue to his mother at the end of the day? Mrs. Bellomo helps the children make a sign, take the statue back outside on a metal cart with wheels, and set it up right by the building entrance for all the parents to see.

On this Tuesday, Alison Lutton's Early Childhood Visual Arts class began with a trip outside to examine the Statue of Liberty High School and imagine how it might have been built. What questions might the children have asked? What problems might have been posed and solved? What do you think the children were studying and learning about? What kind of curriculum planning

by Alison Lutton and Sherry Bellomo



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do you think this teacher does? After generating their own ideas, Mrs. Bellomo came in to tell the students her story. It was a great day. The language of the visual arts engaged children in creative thinking, problem solving, and collaborative learning. Early childhood college students were able to see textbooks and discussions about visual arts and visual thinking transformed into thought and action by real children. Setting to work on snow with the tools, techniques, and language of the visual arts generated an explosion of ways to explore life and generate shared understandings about self, others, and the world.

Oh, No! Her Lips Fell Off! – A Good Question to Ponder

The Statue of Liberty High School stood tall at the door through Friday. As children entered the classroom on Monday they announced big trouble. “Something happened to the State of Liberty High School!” All coats on! Everyone outside! Grant looked at the statue, put his hands on his cheeks, and yelled, “Oh, no! Her lips fell off!” The search began. Children and teacher looked all over the ground and walked up and down the sidewalk. Morganna began to question this strategy. “Maybe we won’t find them. I think the wind blew them away, maybe.” Alexia was pretty sure the lips were lost because the snow melted. Mrs. Bellomo commented, “This is a good question to ponder.” The children decided that the statue was in fact melting and should be brought inside “to keep her safe.”

With the statue back in the classroom, the day focused on measuring, hypothesizing, charting, creating new hypotheses, counting, and using the language and elements of mathematics as problem-solving tools. Mrs. Bellomo and the children checked the statue every hour. They used a turkey baster to suck up the water appearing on the tray. They charted their observations and measurements. They sang and acted out a song about five snowmen melting. They read a book about a boy who tried to save a snowman for next year. They told stories about their own snow adventures and created snow pictures. Mrs. Bellomo wrote down the stories and protected the pictures. By the end of the day it seemed the statue would soon be transformed into numbers and words. Art became language and literature, music and movement, math and science.

The Big, Big City – A Community Generates and Sustains a Project

Architecture, geography, and social studies ruled phase two of the Statue of Liberty High School Project. Everyone shared stories of visits to New York. Which building in New York is the tallest? Is it the Statue of Liberty? Who lives in New York City? Classrooms up and down the hall loaned pictures of cities. Families, teachers, and lab students offered stories, books, music, and artifacts. The dramatic play area became a New York bagel shop. The block area was humming, buzzing, and banging with children. Teachers wrote children’s words and encouraged children to sketch their block constructions. Children studied maps of New York and drew maps of their own. The recycle bin was depleted and a plea for help went home to parents. A display of art work, photos, and children’s words went up in the hall.

During week two, lab students told stories from the Statue of Liberty High School Project in their Visual Arts class and toured the hall display. Mrs. Bellomo went off for a day trip to New York with her son and his eighth grade band.

Mrs. Bellomo returned with a bronze State of Liberty and a pile of postcards. Grant announced, “All right. We can build our own New York City.” They turned to the encyclopedia, maps, and postcards. Teachers and children discovered how the statue was made and how she came to New York. They talked about Ellis Island, immigrants, and life in the big city.

Children began to build their version of New York City on the table. They ripped up paper for water and used round yellow stickers for windows. Uh-oh. Time for lunch and we need the table. What will happen to the city? The group decided to move it onto another table by the wall. The children set the new bronze statue on her own Ellis Island, surrounded by buildings everywhere.

The next day Grant studied the box city and announced, “We’ve got to make it bigger.” The table moved out into the hall. New buildings were erected. Cars and people were made. An airplane appeared “to take people to the statue.” Inside the classroom, other children were making their own versions of American flags, marching to patriotic songs, and role playing “Lady Liberty.” Families shared information about their nationalities and cultures. Children created more cities, more maps, and a huge mural of New York City. A teacher noticed Bradley tracing Madison’s body on a large piece of paper. Madison was holding a paper towel roll in her hand. This “hu-mungous statue” was given a backing and stuffed so she could stand up and watch over the New York Big Box City —

and not melt. Excited discussions about New York City reached a new level. It was time for a class trip.

The trip began with a little talk from the tour guide, who had a remarkable resemblance to Mrs. Bellomo. Miss Butz and Madison made sure everyone had their tickets. A work-study student and Pieter were the bus drivers. Sometimes the road got very bumpy. Everyone ducked heads through the Lincoln Tunnel, then looked up very high to see the buildings. Everyone said, “oooh” and “aahhh.” The tour guide reminded children to “pick a partner and hold hands. We don’t want to lose anyone.” Mike, the boatman, (who also looked just like Mrs. Bellomo) collected tickets and took the group to Ellis Island — carefully so no one fell in the water. Everyone peered through the fog.

Suddenly, there she was, barely visible in the mist, and looking a lot like Miss Butz with a toilet paper roll in her hand. The boat circled, with more ooohs and ahhhs. The statue winked! Grant was startled. His friend Bradley offered reassurance, “It’s okay. It’s only Miss Butz. It’s not the real Statue of Liberty.” The tour group wandered around town (the New York Big Box City on a table), admiring all the buildings. Of course a trip to New York would not be a trip to New York without a stop at a vendor stand for hot dogs and pretzels. After a visit to the Make Your Own Torch And Crown souvenir stand, the group returned home.

Art Leads Learning

Our early childhood program is based on Art as a Way of Learning,[®] a professional development program created through a partnership between Northampton Community College and Binney & Smith, Inc.

At the core of our program is the belief that art leads learning. Human beings use multiple language systems as tools for understanding and communicating. These language systems include verbal, gestural/kinesthetic, musical, mathematical, and visual/graphic languages. Each language has its own elements and its own structural principles. None of these languages is inherently artistic or non-artistic. All have aesthetic potential. (Gardner)

“The aesthetic use of a language is deeply rooted in what we know and feel about that knowing. Aesthetic forms of communication are thus tied directly to personal experiences and cultural contexts. Aesthetic creations depict the fullness of humanity and our potential to create change, develop new understandings, and trans-

form perspectives. Personal, expressive use of language demands critical and creative thinking and results in self-discovery and new knowledge.

“... The arts (dance, drama, music, and visual arts) are languages which enable children to construct and communicate their knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings, both functionally and aesthetically.

“Children’s abilities . . . span all of their languages, and they quite readily share ideas and feelings through various artistic forms beginning at a young age. Their singing, dancing, dramas, and paintings demonstrate an unabashed enthusiasm for artistic communication.”

— P. Pinciotti, & R. Gordon in

Art as a way of learning[®]. Explorations in teaching.

Bethlehem, PA: Northampton Community College, 2001.

It is natural for children to use symbolic languages, but skilled teachers create a special community of children and adults thinking, doing, and learning together. Good teachers develop skills and strategies that support children’s creative and critical thinking. Learning happens when children use art to connect to prior knowledge, gain meaningful new information, generate new ideas, and practice valuable skills. This process occurs in spontaneous and sporadic ways every day. It takes on a special nature when the swirl of life is focused, when that focus is sustained and used to organize ideas.

Our children’s program has no proscribed curriculum, but we find that the project approach works for us as a way to integrate and organize the study of emergent curriculum themes (Jones & Nimmo). Our projects are arts-based. Teachers, children, and college students generate topic webs as a graphic way to depict the ideas, concepts, and major sub-themes within a project. The project approach helps us to test the value of potential topics for study, to generate webs of concepts and possibilities, and to assess children’s development and learning (Katz & Chard).

Art is a thinking and learning process of decision making, analyzing, imagining, reflecting, and synthesizing. Art is problems posed and solved. Art is an experience that stands apart from the flow of everyday life (Dewey). Sometimes the project is beautiful, sometimes not. Sometimes there is a product that lasts for centuries, sometimes the product is temporary, and sometimes there is no product at all. Sometimes the product melts away in time, despite all efforts to keep it safe.

We still have photos, journals, quotes, the Big Box City,

the statue that won't melt, and the mural. Projects generate archives of beautiful stuff that we want to save forever. But this project's true value was the degree to which it helped us to build our teaching-learning environment. The Statue of Liberty High School galvanized and transformed this year's learning community of children, families, early childhood students, and teachers.

Epilogue

It is a hot day in June. Hot like a desert. By mid-day sheets of paper are taped together and suspended from clotheslines. A sign says, "tent." Another sign taped to the water fountain says, "oasis." Children are talking to each other about camels. Teachers are shuffling through collections of art prints. Our article is due and a tiny grain of a project is emerging that as yet has no name. We'll see what tomorrow brings.

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Children as Problem-solvers: These authors begin their article by talking about a classroom climate where children *know* that teachers will not provide solutions and that solutions must include everyone that is interested. How did the social climate get that way? After reading this article, discuss with teachers how they might create such a climate in their classrooms. Identify some strategies worth trying and send teachers back to see what works. When teachers are trying out new ideas, expect that many of them won't work. Support their construction of knowledge by encouraging them to keep trying to develop strategies that do work.

Good Question!: The students in the visual arts class came up with some good questions teachers might borrow to explore children's project learning (see page 41). Visit a classroom in your school with another teacher. Pose some of the questions in this article as you look at emerging project work in the classroom.

Not All at Once: The authors of this article give us a good picture of the timeline of this project. What is more difficult to discern is the structure of the classroom as the project unfolds. Was it done as a large group? If not, how did the children distribute themselves in the various activities? When did the teachers identify supporting resources and enrich the classroom with them? These types of real questions can become road-blocks for teachers who are just experimenting with project work. After reading this article, discuss these and other questions that come up with interested teachers.

Using Prior Knowledge: These authors talk about using art to connect prior knowledge to new information, knowledge, and skills, and to stimulate creating new information knowledge, and skills. Work with interested teachers to develop strategies for recording and collecting evidence of prior knowledge to revisit with children.

Building Your Resource Library: Consider expanding your resource library to support further study of these ideas by purchasing resource books from the reference list.

Children, Learning, Art, and Culture

Sister Maria Sylva Ramos

Sister Sylva is an early childhood student who was enrolled in Visual Arts and Music and Movement courses during the Statue of Liberty High School project. She spent two hours a week in Mrs. Bellomo's classroom. Sr. Sylva was born in the Philippines, lived for a few years in Italy, and has been in the United States for 14 years. She has been a teacher at St. Anthony's Convent preschool for eight years.

"I used to think a project was an art activity, something that started and ended in a day. But the total immersion in this project was incredible. It was everywhere. You heard it in the children's talk about the twin towers, cars, the Lincoln Tunnel. You heard it as parents and children looked at maps together.

Where's the Rockefeller Center? The twin towers? I couldn't answer their questions. I had to go to the Internet.

"This project gave all of us a way to put everything into context. It made possible cooperative art at age four. Children are amazing. Their visual thinking, their imagination is more vivid than adult imagination — maybe less complex but more vivid. Children were so proud of their city of wood scraps. It made me think about ways my childhood gave me the opportunity to respect myself, to become educated. In my culture it is important to strengthen our muscles, not just to play with toys but to use real tools.

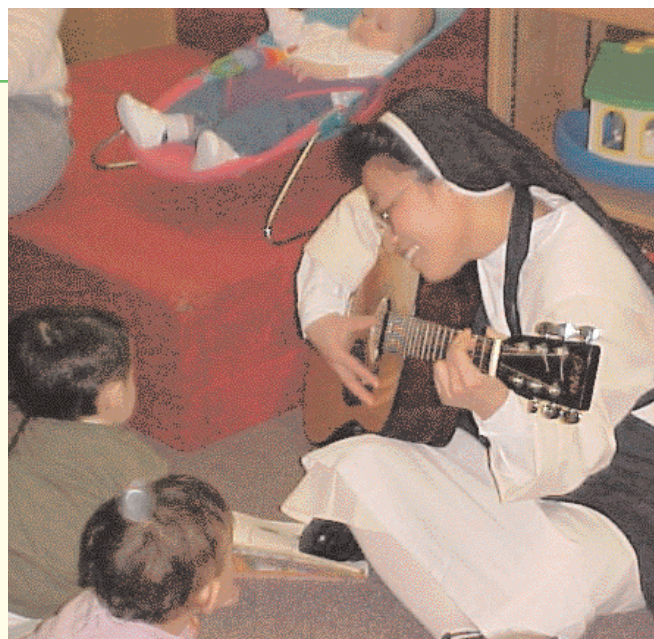
"Art is discovering the power of a tool in a human hand. As children we used the real tools of farming and fishing. Our soil is clay for our artists. Touching tools is touching power. In my childhood we had paintbrushes, but we also used twigs and cypress leaves as brushes. We used coconut husks to make castanets and piggy banks. We all learned to make baskets from palm leaves. We learned shapes from collections of bark, sand, shells, and stones. Everyone stays at home in the evening because it is a good time to be with your family to study, talk and make things. We had no television, radio, or telephone. But we had oceans to swim, mountains to climb, soil to farm, caves to explore, wrens and orchids in the forest. At school we cleaned our own classrooms. We brought knives to school every day but we were not thinking about violence. We used our knives for gardening and our intelligence to cut schoolyard grass.

"In the United States there is so much opportunity. So much stuff. Maybe we respect things more, respect nature more. Tropical people wake up early and full of spirit. Cold countries are so different. Americans are embarrassed about so many things. Our teachers taught us art, dance, music, farming, everything. Children need to be taught to respect tools. Hands are so much a part of a person. Mrs. Bellomo is a very intelligent, fascinating kind of teacher. Parents say early childhood education is like babysitting, but they don't live in this world each day."

A parent interrupts Sr. Sylva to hand her a gift. It is a box of gold wrapped chocolate coins. The parent says that her child tells stories about Sr. Sylva at home. "I just want to thank you for making this year a good experience for him to be in a lab school."

Sr. Sylva continues. "One day we were trying to build something very tall and wondered how do people build tall buildings? How do they carry things up? Reese wanted to make a pulley. I told him he would have to help me figure this out. Mrs. B and I worked together. We collected heavy things and containers. We used the college faculty, books, and the Internet as resources. I wonder if there is a virtual tour of New York on the Internet? Why didn't I think of that? Teachers need to be informed but also know how to use resources. I will learn this mistake. I have a lot of things to learn."

In May, as the Statue of Liberty High School project wound down, Sr. Sylva passed the U.S. citizenship test.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALISON LUTTON